

# After the undercurrents

## Gordon Bennett, Emily Karaka

### 31 January – 11 April 2026

Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland is located within a significant volcanic field, encouraging inhabitants and visitors alike to stay attuned to a sense of deep time. Made up of around 50 volcanoes, the field enables a connection that extends all the way to Mataaho, kaitiaki of the Earth's secrets; to te iwi Māori who have lived and continue to live here; to the complexity of urbanisation, with many of these sacred sites having been mined for the city's infrastructure. Deep below this isthmus is an undercurrent that every once in a while bursts through the mantle, ensuring we remember that indeed, the Earth is alive. As a site full of intensity, Tāmaki Makaurau provides an effective lens to consider history as an essential framework for reckoning with the here and now, prompting the questions: which parts of society gather pressure when issues are not tended to? What necessary conversations burst through, fundamentally changing how we live and relate to each other?

As potent voices of their generation, Gordon Bennett's and Emily Karaka's work bursts through the status quo. Both artists address the impacts of colonisation on themselves as individuals and the communities they belong to. Their visually divergent but equally propulsive practices can be characterised as history painting inviting new readings of contemporary society by opening up the nexus of politics, visual culture, and the deeply personal. The divergence in their practices creates a powerful friction in the exhibition, amplifying the implications of a fulsome scrutinisation of history. Friction is also evident in their shared approach to working in a highly embodied way by employing scale, dynamic surfaces, and even the inclusion of their whakapapa or themselves. By leaning into friction these artists shatter narrowing expectations of how a contemporary artist who is Indigenous should work and contribute whether in Aotearoa, Australia, or beyond.

Emily Karaka's vibrant paintings have a pulse. Unashamedly she is an abstract expressionist, largely self-taught. She powerfully activates, line, colour, and language. Like the isthmus Tāmaki Makaurau, Karaka's current deviates

Artspace Aotearoa is a public contemporary art gallery, founded in 1987 by artists and arts workers. We platform contemporary art practice, develop discourse, provide resources for artists, and connect the Aotearoa context with international conversations. Our mission is to critically explore contemporary life, led by artists.

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from standard temporal delineations as she engages with kōrero from her tupuna, from today, and tomorrow. As an artist-activist Karaka describes her work as political landscapes. The artworks in the exhibition insert an Indigenous, full body analysis into the subject within the frame. The Hawai'i suite originally commissioned for Hawai'i Contemporary 2025 displays her dedication to sovereignty and the role that primary sacred sites play within her practice. *LAW A?* (2026), commissioned for this exhibition, takes the basic requirement for survival—land, air, water—as its starting point. Karaka scrutinises the conglomerate agency LAWA (Land, Air, Water Aotearoa), made up of various council, government, education, science, and private sector groups that measure the health of these resources. While the data may be practically useful, it is notable that a Māori voice is not visible. She subtly draws our attention to the way kaitiakitanga plays out in the current environment where transparency around participation and knowledge sharing is more urgent than ever.

Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) came to prominence in the early 1990s in Brisbane after graduating from art school as a mature age student. He played a key role in the Brisbane community where as an artist of Indigenous Australian and Anglo-Celtic heritage he actively contributed to reshaping conversations on coloniality and identity. Bennett strode into a post-modern conversation, his practice emerged as incisive, confronting, and was often laced with a humorous undercurrent. The artwork in the exhibition captures the breadth of his practice: painting, printmaking, performance, video, and writing. *Study for Possession Island* (1991) is indicative of his early work which deploys appropriation to address the skewed way that the settlement of Australia has often been portrayed. As he grappled with the physiological toll of working with the weight of violent subject matter, his work embraced more definitively abstract methods. Throughout his career he tested expectations of the artist's role in the post-colonial conversation, including withdrawing his engagement with media. The ongoing impact of these expectations within and beyond the artworld is further revealed in the writings and video on display, capturing the mutli-faceted lens through which he worked, spanning the raw, fragile, and overtly punk.

This exhibition tracks undercurrents that span a long arc of time and connects Aotearoa with its neighbour Australia. In the current geo-political climate conversations on how we relate to each other in daily and in administered life are often bluntly wielded with little or no consideration of “which history?” Both Bennett and Karaka create a platform for these tensions to play out through their vivid artistic languages. As they produce vernacular history painting, they draw out the complexities innate in common narratives. In taking bold friction-making positions as artists and participants in society they produce a release valve. By releasing tension in this way, their reflections on the world around them bursts forth rather than building up deep below the surface. They offer audiences a pathway to a maturing conversation on our histories and an expansive view of time in order to imagine our futures, together.

1.  
Emily Karaka  
*LAW A?, 2026*

Oil, acrylic, modelling paste on canvas.  
Triptych, three elements 1500 x 1500 mm,  
one element 2725 x 905 mm, two elements  
2750 x 905 mm.

This suite of work produced from winter 2025  
to summer 2026 takes the basic requirement  
for survival—land, air, water—as its  
starting point to celebrate our natural  
world and demand ongoing kaitiakitanga  
for it.

Commissioned by Artspace Aotearoa.  
Courtesy the artist.

2.  
*Kohala 1, 2024*

Mixed media on canvas, 1950 x 1960 mm.  
This painting connects the sacred Hawaiian  
mountain of Kohala to Māori cosmology  
through the Tainui carving Te Uenuku,  
a taonga linking Aotearoa to the ancestral  
homeland of Hawaiki.  
Courtesy the artist.

3.  
*Hualālai, 2024*

Mixed media on canvas, 1950 x 1960 mm.  
Celebrating Native Hawaiian identity  
(Kānaka Maoli), this work invokes  
the powerful war chant by Rewi Maniapoto  
AKE AKE AKE as an expression of protest,  
resilience, and unwavering commitment  
to ancestral legacy.  
Courtesy the artist.

4.  
*Mauna Kea, 2024*

Mixed media on canvas, 1950 x 1960 mm.  
Depicting Mauna Kea as a sacred site of  
protest, the painting's texts conjure key  
figures from Hawaiian contemporary music  
and a 1998 documentary investigating the  
disturbance of ancestral remains.  
Courtesy the artist.

5.  
*Mauna Loa, 2024*

Mixed media on canvas, 1950 x 1960 mm.  
Inscribed with data of occupation and  
resistance, this work includes key dates of  
US presence, population decline, and a quote  
from a resistance leader Haunani-Kay Trask  
alongside the Māori term Mana motuhake.  
Courtesy the artist.

6.  
*Kī lauea, 2024*

Mixed media on canvas, 2035 x 1960 mm.  
Referencing the volcano goddess Pele, this  
work depicts one of the Kanaka Maoli flags and  
the phrase Nā Maka o ka 'Āina (The Eyes of  
the Land) to assert Indigenous sovereignty.  
Courtesy the artist.

7.  
Gordon Bennett  
*Study for Possession Island, 1991*

Oil, synthetic polymer paint and gouache  
on illustration board, 650 x 1000 mm (board),  
840 x 1150 mm (frame).

A key study for the Possession Island  
series, this work isolates the Indigenous  
figure from a colonial etching, placing  
him against a grid evoking a Renaissance  
perspective, a critique of Western regimes  
of representation.

Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Bennett and  
The Collection of Wavell State High School,  
Brisbane.



8.

*Number Five, 2005*

Synthetic polymer paint on linen, two panels each 1010 x 1210 mm.

Spanning 2003–2008, Bennett's "Stripe" series represent a strategic retreat from overt political content, a deliberate act of 'going silent' to claim artistic freedom beyond prescribed identities.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

9.

*I am Gordon Bennett, 1990*

*Aboriginality to me, 1990*

*I propose, 1990*

Archival document enlarged as custom made vinyl stickers, originals, 140 x 100 mm; 150 x 100 mm; 150 x 100 mm.

This selection from Bennett's large body of personal writings offers a window into his career-long investigation of and play with language as a powerful political and artistic tool for interrogating society and its structures.

Photography Carl Warner.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

10.

*Through the Void (Diving Board), 1993*

*Blue Retreat, 1993*

*The Real Value of Art (Culture Bag), 1993*

*Non Swimmer – The Inland Sea, 1993*

*A Level of Abstraction, 1993*

*Created by Flux, 1993*

*Memory, 1993*

Soft ground etching with watercolour on paper, 600 x 400 mm.

This series of etchings interrogates the utopian claims of Western abstraction, using the visual language of artists including Yves Klein and Kazimir Malevich to question the contingency of Western freedom.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

11.

*D.U.H! (Down Under Homi), 1994*

Single channel colour video with sound, 18'13" min, looped.

Bennett, disguised in a plague doctor's mask, dances to Ice-T's incendiary track "Race War", triangulating between global hip-hop, Australian racism, and Western avant-garde performance.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

12.

*Home Décor (After M. Preston), No 21, 2013*

Synthetic polymer paint on linen, 1825 x 1520 mm.

Bennett critically re-works the art of white Australian modernist painter Margaret Preston, exposing how she appropriated Indigenous shield designs and reduced them to decorative motifs for domestic consumption.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

13.

*Aboriginal Generative, 1993*

Soft ground etching enlarged as a custom made vinyl sticker, original 605 mm x 400mm.

This work plays with the literal and figurative trap of the Western grid as a neutral device, using dry humor this work interrogates the ways in which Indigenous peoples have been depicted throughout history.

Photography Carl Warner.

Courtesy The Collection of The Estate of Gordon Bennett.

## Events

Saturday 14 February, 2pm  
Exhibition tour with Kaitohu  
Director Ruth Buchanan

Thursday 19 February, 6pm  
Pūtātara: Revolutions in Māori Art,  
RNZ Podcast Launch

Thursday 5 March, 6pm  
Question time: A lecture  
by Maria Lind  
Time is the new space

Friday 6 March – Saturday 7  
March, 10am–4pm  
In Focus: A Curatorial Intensive  
with Maria Lind

Saturday 21 March, 2pm  
Emily Karaka in conversation  
with Chelsea Winstanley

Saturday 28 March, 11am–4pm  
A performance  
by Kalisolaite 'Uhila

To learn more about these events, visit  
[artspace-aotearoa.nz](https://artspace-aotearoa.nz)

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Gordon Bennett (1955–2014) lived and worked in Brisbane and is acclaimed as one of Australia's most significant and critically engaged contemporary artists. He is recognised for his perspectives on the post-colonial experience, particularly in the Australian context, with much of his work mapping alternative histories and questioning racial categorisations and stereotypes. Bennett regularly adopted the persona 'John Citizen' as a means of confronting the rhetoric of identity and the politics of categorisation in Australian art. Solo exhibitions include *Unfinished Business - The Art of Gordon Bennett* (2020–

2021), QAGOMA, Brisbane; *Gordon Bennett: Be Polite* (2016), Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *Outsider / Insider: The Art of Gordon Bennett* (2012), AAMU, Utrecht; *Gordon Bennett: a survey*, (2007), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Select group exhibitions include *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art (2025), University of Melbourne; *Espressioni Con Frazioni, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea* (2022), Italy; *A Year in Art: Australia 1992* (2021–2022), Tate Modern, London; *8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art* (2014), Berlin; *Documenta 13* (2012), Kassel, Germany; *Cubism and Australian Art* (2009), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; *16th Biennale of Sydney: Revolutions - forms that turn* (2008), Sydney; *Three Colours: Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson* (2004), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne.

Emily Karaka was born in 1952 in Tāmaki Makaurau, where she continues to live and work. She is of Ngāpuhi (Ngāti Hine and Ngāti Kahu o Torongare) and Waikato-Tainui (Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Te Kawerau ā Maki, Ngāti Tamaoho, Te Ākitai Waiohua, Ngāti Rori-Te Ahiwaru, Ngāti Mahuta, and Ngāti Tahinga) affiliations, and has been exhibiting since 1977. Her paintings draw on diverse art making traditions, including toi whakairo (carving) and abstract expressionism. Characterised by dazzling colour and emotional intensity, they frequently incorporate text and tie into the artist's long standing work advocating kaitiakitanga (stewardship) and mana motuhake (self-determination). Karaka has produced major paintings for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, *NIRIN* (2020), the landmark *Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art* (2020–2021) at Toi o Tāmaki, and *Aloha Nō* (2025), Hawai'i Triennial 2025. Recent solo exhibitions include *Matariki Ring of Fire* (2022) at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, which grew out of Karaka's 2021 McCahon House residency, and *Ka Awatea, A New Dawn* (2024), curated by Hoor Al Qasimi and Megan Tamati-Quennell, at Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates. Her works are held by important institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad, including Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, and Sharjah Art Foundation.

The annual question  
Which history?

Each year Artspace Aotearoa sets one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2026, we ask “which history?”

In her essay “Twitch” Tina Makereti begins with an early childhood memory, where questions about “where do I come from?” lead her to go out into the dark night with her father and study the moon. Folding this memory into her now decades of lived experience she clarifies the consideration: “The internal world: the external world. How do we know our place in the universe?”<sup>1</sup> She answers this question with the word whakapapa. The essay goes on to unfold whakapapa as a practical, poetic, and embodied framework to consider and equally discover ourselves in the world. This unfolding of whakapapa enlivens a sense of time—and therefore also history—as something that does not happen to us, but something we are braided into as co-creators. In this paradigm we are both receptacles and actors who move within an arena. Whakapapa provides a dynamic and Aotearoa-specific lens to consider this toggling between actor and receptacle within society. This toggling activates the consideration: how can I act fully toward my place in time? How can I act in lively conversation with history?

<sup>1</sup> Tina Makereti. “Twitch”, *This Compulsion in Us*. (Te Herenga Waka Press, 2025), pg 57.

Being ‘in time’ in the embodied way that whakapapa encourages is also a way of describing context. That is to say, what are the circumstances that impact the environment in which I find myself and my capacity to understand that? As a leading forum and platform for contemporary art, Artspace Aotearoa must necessarily scrutinise its own context, the arena and the frameworks in which it operates. Since 2023 we have approached one question at a time to do this, drawing a line between the work we do, artists who inspire, artworks that catalyse, and the world in which we live. So far we have probed three areas of life: body, territory, and language. Each of these areas came with their own conventions and boundaries that encircle much of daily life: assumptions around private and public space, division of labour, and which words are used where. These very same conventions, established over time and through repetition, play a significant role in our individual capacity to participate in our context.

These conventions are deeply bound to and informed by history. They span the *what*, *how*, and *who* of documenting and sharing ritual, experiences, and lives. In asking “which history?” we test history as an open form, insisting—like many other forms—that it is malleable, with multiple versions, available for interrogation by artists, writers, critical thinkers, and indeed, our organisation. After all, nothing is ever really closed, not even history. Our programme approaches the paradox of history: the certain value of standardised operations and methods within Western frameworks

at the same time as exploring the friction, the jouissance, that the expanding of tones and tenors, bring to bear. In the 2026 programme we tackle Indigenous sovereignty and the colonial experience; so-called minor histories; art education—arguably the crucible of the contemporary art context and perspectives from emergent artists working in Tāmaki Makaurau today. Across 2026, we also consider the organisation’s legacy and the metaphorical and physical ways we can reconsider our own standards of behaviour.

At the heart of Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide’s November 2025 lecture *That Time You Were Not There*<sup>2</sup> was that as artists, curators, writers, and other engaged society members it is essential to understand that “our horizon is not the institution. It is elsewhere, and otherwise.” Implied in the consideration of “which history?” is a sister question that expands the horizon, bends it ever so slightly: “which future?” Through an intergenerational programme of activity that includes painting, performance, film, sculpture, workshops, tours, symposium, and much more, we scratch into both sides of the temporal coin, seeking out continuity rather than fragmentation.

If the Artspace Aotearoa mission is to explore contemporary life, led by artists, it feels timely in a world characterised by tumult and an ever flattening of nuance to look at how

we got here. The 2026 programme invites audiences to engage through a holistic lens that includes the deep ungraspable time of spiralling whakapapa, that moon gazed at by a young child, our current moment, and where we see ourselves tomorrow and beyond. In asking “which history?” Artspace Aotearoa casts out a hopeful call to the endless possibility for the critical and creative imagination to play an essential role in shaping what comes next.

Kaitohu Director, Ruth Buchanan  
January 2026

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To support our work and enjoy additional events consider joining a Supporters Circle. To learn more about this programme, visit [artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko](https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko)

<sup>2</sup> This lecture was held at Artspace Aotearoa as part of the Creative New Zealand Toi o Aotearoa Te Manu Ka Tau International Visitors Programme.

Each year Artspace Aotearoa asks one question. Across the year, this question is explored by artworks, artists, and audiences. In 2026, we ask, “which history?” You can think of our annual exhibition programme as a connected inquiry, in four parts and with many possible answers. Join us.

2026

Which history?